
THE LEAHY WAR VICTIMS FUND — A CRUCIAL PART OF U.S. HUMANITARIAN AID

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The Leahy War Victims Fund was established in 1989 to respond to the needs of innocent victims of conflict in developing countries. Under the management of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Fund provides \$10 million annually for programs to assist people living with disabilities resulting from civil strife and warfare, says Senator Patrick J. Leahy, who led efforts to create the Fund. Most of the money has been used to provide affordable and appropriate artificial limbs and related medical, rehabilitation, and vocational assistance to victims of landmines and other unexploded ordnance (UXO).

Years ago, when my wife Marcelle and I began traveling to developing countries, we witnessed the ravages of conflict on civilian populations. The streets of Phnom Penh, Managua, Kabul, and many other cities were flooded with disabled civilians, many of them children, begging for help. We quickly learned that many of these people were innocent victims of war — farmers and schoolchildren — who had been maimed by landmines and other unexploded ordnance (UXO). These unsuspecting victims were not only disfigured and ostracized by their communities — they often had no way to earn income and were forced to the streets.

The Leahy War Victims Fund was established in 1989 to respond to the needs of these innocent victims of conflict in developing countries. Under the management of USAID, today the Fund provides \$10 million annually for programs to assist people living with disabilities resulting from civil strife and warfare. The majority of the funds have been used to provide affordable and appropriate artificial limbs and related medical, rehabilitation, and vocational assistance to victims of landmines and other UXO. The Fund has also been used to help those who have suffered from the indirect consequences of conflict, such as polio caused by interrupted immunization campaigns.

When I first proposed the Fund, the State Department and USAID were, frankly, unenthusiastic. They said helping war victims was not a foreign policy priority.

It wasn't a "strategic objective." War victims did not need their own fund; they would, like other people, benefit from our other health and economic development programs. But what I had seen convinced me that there was both a pressing need and an opportunity for a more substantial, targeted response.

During the first few years of the program, we started small and learned big. For example, we found that training local people, many of whom were disabled themselves, was essential. We also discovered that enabling amputees to walk or use wheelchairs is simply a first step. We also realized the numerous obstacles to recovery confronting these people as they try to rebuild their lives. There is, of course, the physical recovery, but these people also face social and psychological adjustments, a lack of employable skills, and discrimination in the workplace.

Advocacy, legislation, and policy reform by and for people with disabilities are as necessary for their social and economic inclusion as artificial limbs are.

USAID has had exceptionally capable, committed people managing the Fund, who consult closely with the Congress on its implementation. Since its inception, more than \$112 million has been disbursed through 19 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in 28 countries in Central America, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

One of my proudest moments was when President George H.W. Bush agreed to use the Leahy Fund in Vietnam, the first U.S. assistance to the Vietnamese people since the war. The Fund in Vietnam has done more than improve peoples' lives; it has enabled two former enemies to work together to rebuild trust. Because it was purely humanitarian, the Fund provided a neutral mechanism to open the door for discussions on a wide range of issues which ultimately led to the resumption of formal diplomatic relations. More recently, the Fund has been used in Vietnam to support efforts culminating in the passage of two national laws regarding disabilities and the establishment of building design codes and construction standards to ensure access for people with disabilities.

Over the years, the Fund has adapted to provide support for a variety of interventions, including improving medical and surgical services, developing and enforcing laws and policies regarding people with disabilities, promoting partnerships between NGOs and governments, and expanding employment and economic opportunities.

Each country poses different challenges and opportunities. For example, in Laos, an impoverished country with a large UXO problem, the Fund has focused on addressing the surgical, medical, and rehabilitation needs of victims of traumatic injuries in isolated rural areas. In Lebanon, the Fund is supporting a cooperative of landmine victims to develop markets for local agricultural products. In Sierra Leone, the Fund has been used to provide artificial limbs and occupational and psychological counseling for children and adults who suffered physical mutilations in the civil war.

Of the many challenges that remain, ensuring the sustainability of programs is perhaps the most significant. Unfortunately, in post-conflict countries — in fact, in most developing countries — addressing the needs of people with disabilities is not a government priority. Government officials often want to manage these programs, but they rarely have the resources or skills to do so effectively. There are examples of Fund-supported programs that declined

drastically in quality after control was shifted from an NGO to the government. The most successful examples of sustainability occurred where Fund programs have been integrated into existing health structures, utilizing private sector partners, with appropriately trained, supervised, and supported professionals who are responsive to the views of people with disabilities.

The Leahy Fund, because it has been predominately used to help victims of landmines, is part of the U.S. government's broader mine action efforts. Mine victims' assistance is one leg of a three-legged stool — the other legs being humanitarian demining, and banning the production, export, and use of mines. Support for all three is essential, particularly by the world's lone superpower, if the global mine problem is to be solved.

Although the United States has not joined the worldwide Ottawa Convention, which bans anti-personnel mines, we are the world's largest contributor to humanitarian demining. The State Department plans to spend \$50 million in Fiscal Year 2004, not counting at least that amount to clear millions of unexploded mines and other UXO that litter Afghanistan and Iraq. These efforts, which are costly, time consuming, and dangerous, will prevent the deaths and crippling injuries of thousands of innocent people.

My goal is to one day be able to say that the Leahy War Victims Fund is no longer needed. But despite the efforts of the United States and other countries to find and destroy landmines before they are triggered by unsuspecting children, these insidious weapons and other UXO-like cluster bomb duds will indiscriminately maim and kill for the foreseeable future. For that reason, the Fund will continue to have a role in U.S. foreign policy — not because it necessarily fits into some strategic objective, and not because it necessarily advances some other foreign policy goal (although it often does). The Fund will continue to be important because it is the right and humane thing for the world's wealthiest, most powerful country, to do. ●